Remapping the Tripartite Register: 
Moving Beyond Formal, Nonformal and Informal Learning

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Currently, in adult education, learning is divided into three categories: formal, nonformal, and informal. These are descriptive categories that highlight the different contexts in which people learn. Underlying this tripartite register, however, is a value system that obscures and diminishes learning that occurs within certain realms, while it supports and reifies learning that occurs in other realms. The current divisions function to define a frontier of action for adult educators that identifies areas where the principles of adult education can be deployed. Analyses of learning practices are consistently conducted from the perspective of the “formal.” Nonformal and informal learning (even in word) are treated as derivative of and secondary to formal learning processes.

In this paper, we challenge the validity of the tripartite register and contend that there is really only one kind of adult learning process (we have come to call it the indigenous learning process). In this new view, informal and nonformal learning are not at all derivative. Rather, they point to a deeply important and pervasive learning process that lies at the very crux of human uniqueness. Formal learning, in this frame, is not at all privileged. In fact, we would argue that the reason formal learning has retained such a prominent position in adult education is not because it is intrinsically more valuable than other forms of learning but simply because it reinforces the values of a profession that would like to assert greater control over adult learning processes. Formal learning, we contend, must be understood as a specific and intensely managed learning context that frequently serves to regulate preexisting indigenous learning processes for particular purposes. Drawing upon recent literature in social-cultural psychology (Hutchins, 1995; Wenger 1998), and on critical (Habermas, 1987) and feminist (Hart, 1997; Hayes & Flannery, 2000) theory, we explore the ways the tripartite register has been mobilized to exclude and diminish select instances and contexts of indigenous learning. We argue, for instance, that the discourse of formal/nonformal/informal learning has played a role in discrediting the indigenous learning processes that transpire in the homeplace and in HIV/AIDS communities.
The Tripartite Register

Adult educators do not live in a world where all knowledge is held to have equal value. Some knowledge, produced in the well-regulated institutions that dominate contemporary life, is esteemed and valued. It is the knowledge that has undergone careful scrutiny and has been assessed for its effectiveness and workability. Possessing access to this knowledge and being recognized as its legitimate transmitter and promulgator is a carefully guarded privilege. Institutions establish qualifications that are needed for those who may serve in the role of educator. Diplomas, certifications and other social badges clearly demarcate who the experts are. Tight regulations and well defined learning contexts function to control the transfer of knowledge in order to ensure that just the best learning goes on. The tripartite register is one of the ways that educators assert formal learning as the norm against which other kinds of learning are perceived as secondary and less important.

In formal learning contexts knowledge is viewed as something that is tangible and definitive. In these contexts knowledge is characterized as bits of information held in individual human brains and learning as the process by which knowledge is transferred from individual to individual (typically, from an educator – someone already in possession of knowledge, to a learner – someone who does not possess knowledge). It also characterizes “successful” people (those who are productive, healthy, adjusted) to be diligent implementers of “positive” individual and organizational processes. Through learning, people incorporate the knowledge that enables them to implement these positive processes (identified, of course, by those with the most knowledge and expertise in our society).

For the most part, in formal learning contexts, adult educators view the individual person as the “thing that learns” and spend a vast amount of energy assessing the nature of this learning thing (the characteristics of the learner) as a basis for improving their ability to “help” adult learners incorporate information to become more successful. They obsess about factors that impede or enhance the information transfer process and about the techniques that can be used to manage these factors. Knowledge within the formal realm evolves so that it tends to become more set over time. While marginalized groups may challenge certain “truths,” other truths become part of an established pattern that is repeated so frequently that it becomes encrypted within the accepted “body of knowledge” within various disciplines. Formal knowledge is generally disseminated by authority figures within each field (teachers and trainers) through technologies (pedagogical strategies) that frequently do not permit the full participation of learners in a process of negotiating the meaning of knowledge.

In contrast, informal and non-formal learning point to a very different conception of knowledge and learning. Adult educators have long been aware (often uncomfortably) of the world of learning outside of the formal. In one of his early groundbreaking texts, Malcolm Knowles (1950) asserted the importance of informal learning in adulthood and contended that adult educators need to expand the locus of their educational services beyond the boundaries of formal educational institutions. Allan Tough (1979), conducted extensive interviews with adults and found that most people are extensively involved in their own individualized and informal “learning projects” and that learning in formal educational contexts constitutes only a small percentage of the total learning of adults in Canadian society. More recently, David Livingstone (1998) conducted research in which he has found that 90% of Canadian adults are involved in informal learning activities in which they spend on average six hours per week. Even here, though, Livingstone is careful to distinguish “intentional informal learning” from “more diffuse”...
and “tacit forms of learning” (p. 5). Even the best efforts to account for all the ways people learn in informal contexts, he contends, “have only scratched the surface of tacit learning” (p. 5). In Livingstone’s view, however, even though this diffuse territory of learning might exist, it is especially important for adult educators “to generate clearer profiles of intentional informal learning” (p. 22), for it is this kind of informal learning that is most accessible to the influence of adult education processes and policies.

Livingstone’s attitude towards “informal learning” is very typical of adult educators. Rather than viewing it as something to be considered or even investigated in its own right, informal learning is posited variously as an unruly world that needs to be subjected to the more disciplined approaches of adult education (the disciplinarian), as a threat and a producer of ignorance against which formal adult education must battle (the civilizer), as a great and potentially fruitful market for learning products that can be developed to satisfy diversifying student needs (the entrepreneur), or as a wasteland of ignorance that can simply be ignored or discredited (the expert). In each case, the informal learning context is viewed as something that has no value or contribution to make in its own right. As a consequence, adult educators have spent very little effort learning more about the ways people learn in their daily lives. They know very little about the nature and value of indigenous learning processes.

Underlying our own research into the nature of learning in the homeplace and in HIV/AIDS social movements, we have made deliberate efforts to understand indigenous learning processes as a valuable contributor to social life. Underpinning our inquiries has been a notion of learning as the process of negotiating meaning in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). There are two parts to this process that can be understood within the Habermasian (1987) discursive practice of communicative action. First, participation is central to the process by which members are able to raise or criticize validity claims. Claims are made on the condition that the participant can offer warrant in defense of validity. Warrants are usually previously negotiated meanings that can be drawn upon as evidence. Secondly, reification is the process by which meanings are stabilized (objectified) to become a backdrop for future communicative actions. Moments of negotiation occur when meaning is agreed upon for that particular moment within that unique context between divergent interest groups.

For cultural learning to occur, both poles are needed. Reification provides a point of focus for collaborative learning. Negotiating meaning is impossible if there isn’t a shared point of negotiation. Reification also provides a backdrop of previously negotiated meanings that can be drawn upon in the process of negotiation, as individuals can draw upon a shared repertoire of artifacts. Participation provides an opportunity for members to negotiate or renegotiate common understandings to guide collective practices. Knowledge, in this view, is not an object, it is a constantly unfolding process. Habermas (1987) discusses the potential for communicative action to enable people to create new and alternative visions for how the world might be.

Distortion of the cultural learning process occurs when formal learning overshadows the potentiality for other kinds of understanding to inform the learning process, thus crippling the communicative learning process. Educators may enable this distortion, because people in positions of power can constrain the cultural learning process by reducing participation in communities of practice. They do this by creating contexts in which people cannot raise or criticize validity claims on points that do not fit into the existing educational parameters. Educators may regulate spatiality, temporality, communication and artifacts to delineate what aspects of learning are to be considered relevant and worthy of academic discourse. Formal learning contexts are derived contexts in which a series of specific strategies are deployed to
distort the cultural learning process. Spatiality is regulated so that people cannot freely engage in processes of negotiating the meaning of common experiences. Temporality is regulated so that people do not have sufficient time to engage in processes of collaborative inquiry. Communication is regulated so that not all people have equal opportunity to raise or criticize validity claims. Artifacts are posited with unquestionable meanings, as “knowledge” or “facts”. The tools for learning are predefined, and knowledge is objectified.

Contexts that sustain more balanced cultural learning processes are sidelined, as unregulated spatiality is deemed untidy, unregulated temporality is deemed inefficient, unregulated communication is viewed rude, unorganized or off topic, and unregulated artifacts are viewed as unscientific or non-productive. Framing educational discourse so that other types of cultural learning are not perceived to significant, limits the opportunity for critical and reflective learning to occur.

**Indigenous Learning in the Homeplace**

One illustration of how formal learning constrains the indigenous learning processes can be seen in research on women’s learning. Gouthro, for instance, has examined women’s experiences in adult education, where they cannot bring indigenous learning that occurs within the homeplace into academic discourse, as this is not considered to be useful knowledge. Knowledge that evolves in the homeplace is communicatively shaped, focuses on relationships and experience, and is not readily measured or commodified. Gouthro (2002) argues lifelong learning would have a different focus if the emphasis was on the homeplace rather than the marketplace. The homeplace is often of central importance in shaping an individual’s sense of identity and self, in influencing relationships with others, and is also a place, particularly for women, of paid and unpaid labour. Women’s experiences in work, education, and the community are often shaped by their experiences and connections to the homeplace. The homeplace can be seen as a central site of living and learning within the Habermasian (1987) notion of the “lifeworld”. Yet educational discourses generally overlook the homeplace, or subsume it into the broader notion of community. This indigenous learning is consistently treated as peripheral and of lesser value than learning that occurs in more formalized contexts and that is connected to the marketplace. This serves consistently to undermine the value of indigenous learning that many women have, so it is not surprising that Hayes & Smith (1994) discovered that many adult education studies which focus on women treat them as “deficient” and in need of remedial services when they return to formal educational contexts.

Hayes & Flannery (2000) note how women’s experiences are marginalized within academic discourses when formal learning is privileged. These feminist authors advocate for excluded forms of adult learning that are disciplined and marginalized by the register of formal, informal and nonformal learning that currently dominates the field. In focusing on women’s communities of practice, it becomes apparent that much of the richness of knowledge that evolves within indigenous learning contexts is difficult to translate into formal learning settings. They compare women’s learning experiences to a kaleidoscope with its endless variety of patterns. The richness of this learning is often undervalued in current educational discourses, with its emphasis on formalized approaches towards education. The stories of women’s learning experiences, whether it be adapting to life in a nursing home or preaching from a pulpit, are rarely acknowledged or articulated (p.7). When searching for information about women’s learning experiences, they often found “descriptions of educational programs designed for women, teaching methods advocated for women learners, strategies to increase women’s participation in formal education
and so forth” (p. 17). They felt that this emphasis on formal learning created a very limited basis for understanding how learning experiences occur for women in all realms of their lives.

Hart (1995) argues for a radical critique of education to bring in motherwork as a valid form of learning. Learning for “life” entails a different value focus. She emphasizes the importance of subsistence, caring labour. Habermas (1987) talks about the importance of reproducing the lifeworld through culture, solidarity and personality. The work that women do in nurturing the next generation is essential to support the continuation of the lifeworld. Hart’s (2003 in press) work with poor black mothers in Chicago outlines how two very different “communities of practice” can agree to interact to share learning opportunities. By working in a local community center, university educators facilitate literacy programs that enrich the opportunities for women to learn valuable skills that will help them in their efforts to be better mothers. At the same time, by allowing educators to work in their community, the mothers are providing an important site for research into different approaches towards learning and education. This kind of work provides an alternative model for academic educators who are interested in challenging the traditional parameters of academic worksites. Community-based learning experiences provide rich learning and research opportunities.

**Indigenous Learning and HIV/AIDS**

The potentially negative implications of the tripartite register are seen very clearly in relation to HIV/AIDS. While the HIV/AIDS epidemic is well recognized as a significant health issue, it is not often seen as one of the greatest collective learning challenges in recent history. The extent to which humanity succeeds in addressing the many physical, emotional, social and cultural repercussions of the epidemic depends to a large extent on our collective ability to learn about HIV/AIDS and all of its intricate and far-reaching manifestations. Human learning researchers have amassed a considerable body of knowledge of how individuals learn based largely on laboratory studies and experiments. Interestingly, to date, remarkably little is known about the ways people learn “in the wild” – to use Edwin Hutchins (1995) provocative phrase. This fundamental lack of understanding, we believe, is particularly dangerous in a context like HIV/AIDS where there is increasingly strong evidence that indigenous learning “in the wild” has made a deep and significant contribution to addressing the challenges of this disease. Without a clear understanding and appreciation of indigenous learning processes, there is a danger that we might do things that jeopardize a potentially powerful ally in our struggle to respond to HIV/AIDS. Understanding everyday learning processes and the things that sustain or undermine them may be one of the most important steps we can take as we strive to develop a strategy to optimize our response to HIV/AIDS.

In a two year research project in which he investigated the indigenous learning processes of people impacted and affected by HIV/AIDS in Nova Scotia, Plumb (2003) learned that indigenous learning processes transpiring in “communities of practice” in Nova Scotia have contributed deeply to our collective provincial response to the challenges of HIV/AIDS enabling people to 1) negotiate the meaning of shared experiences about HIV/AIDS, 2) generate solidarity and social commitment, 3) forge strong identities equal to the challenges of HIV/AIDS, 4) develop meaningful and effective practices to address HIV/AIDS issues. To the extent that they provide a context that nurtures healthy, caring and participatory communities of practice, community-based HIV/AIDS organizations are a central support of indigenous learning processes in Nova Scotia. Moreover, to the extent that they support rich interpersonal connections between members of different communities of practice, community-based
HIV/AIDS organizations support the emergence of a heterogeneous “learning meshwork” that contributes a highly variable and context specific response to HIV/AIDS in Nova Scotia. Because they mediate the linkages between communities of practice in the Nova Scotia HIV/AIDS meshwork and hierarchically-structured university, medical, corporate and government organizations and institutions, community-based HIV/AIDS organizations have the dual capacity both to draw resources into the community to enhance indigenous learning contexts. Importantly, though, they also have the capacity to subject communities of practice to the formal educational structures of hierarchically-structured organizations and institutions.

Conclusion

Both of these examples point to the importance of understanding more clearly the important role of indigenous learning processes in sustaining key elements of contemporary social life. As long as adult education strives to regulate adult learning according to the tripartite register of formal/nonformal/informal learning, in which only formal learning processes are valued as legitimate and informal learning is banished to the devalued margins of society, it will not contribute to fostering the full learning capacities of human beings. Our view is that we need to abandon the register and to work to understand and support the wonderful potential of indigenous learning processes.

References


